



CRAIG BIRLE

50 years OF WETLAND CONSERVATION

By Patricia Stockdill

All waterfowl production areas are delineated by green-and-white signs with a canvasback duck brood.

They reduce flooding, improve water quality by acting as natural filters to remove pollutants and excess nutrients, recharge groundwater, and, oh, yes, they provide habitat for one of the most diverse ecosystems in the world.

They're wetlands and they come in all sizes, depths and shapes, especially throughout the Prairie Pothole Region.

North Dakota has thousands of wetlands, in large part because willing landowners participate in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Small Wetlands Easement and Acquisition Program.

The program celebrates its 50th anniversary in 2008. Like many habitat and conservation programs, it was born out of necessity. Congress recognized the vital importance of the nation's Prairie Pothole Region and the role of wetlands, which were rapidly disappearing.

By 1958, most of Iowa and Minnesota's wetlands were drained or tiled, supported in large part by government programs encouraging landowners to farm as many acres as possible. The North Dakota landscape experienced similar changes.

However, the consequences were later recognized – low commodity prices for a surplus of grain, increased flooding (severe flooding, at that) and increased water pollutants.

Wetlands and marshes no longer cried with the sound of abundant wildlife. By 1958, that silence reverberated all the way to Washington, D.C.

Congress amended the 1934 Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp Act, the Federal Duck Stamp Act, authorizing the FWS to purchase land and easements, or both, from willing landowners in parts of the five-state area that is the United States' Prairie Pothole Region – portions of North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, Minnesota and northeastern Montana.

Beginning in 1961, wetlands enhancement biologists identified key habitat areas suitable for easements and acquisitions, literally driving throughout the Prairie Pothole Region, visiting with landowners and observing the countryside.

It was commonplace for landowners to contact the FWS, said Lloyd Jones, FWS refuge coordinator, Bismarck. In many situations, the land was difficult to farm around – or in some dry years when wetlands

were farmed, a rain would come along and flood low-lying crops, wiping out any hope of income.

Selling land or entering into wetland easement agreements offered solutions for many landowners. "To this day we have more landowner interest, particularly easements, than we have money for," Jones said.

By 1965, the FWS had obtained almost 50,000 acres in North Dakota, which became waterfowl production areas. They provide much needed nesting habitat for waterfowl and other wildlife associated with a wetlands ecosystem.

And they provide public hunting, fishing and trapping opportunities.

Also by 1965, almost 135,000 acres in the state were in wetland easements. The easements allow landowners to do anything they want on surrounding land, but prohibits burning, draining and filling of the easement wetland.

Today, 50 years after the Duck Stamp Act amendment began protecting wetlands and upland habitat, North Dakota has more than 243,000 acres in waterfowl production areas throughout the state's Prairie Pothole Region, and another 1.1 million acres in wetland easements.

The program had its controversies, however, which Jones said fell into two categories: first, a perception the program was a "drainage stopper," because in some areas an easement could put the brakes on a drainage project.

In addition, the program became engulfed in the Garrison Diversion Unit controversy and what was considered wildlife interests' opposition to Garrison Diversion. "Eventually, we worked through that (controversy)," Jones said, in large part through dialogue with the state of North Dakota and the FWS.

A January 1987 document details agreements between North Dakota under former Governor George Sinner and the FWS. "Have we moved on beyond the Wetlands Wars? Absolutely," Jones exclaimed.

North Dakota has a cap of 1.3 million acres of wetland easements in an agreement with the state approved by former Governor Bill Guy and the FWS in the program's early years.

Landowner interest is so high in some counties that the number of easement acres is near its cap. The FWS can acquire any number of fee title acquisitions for WPAs, but North Dakota law requires county commission review and approval followed by gubernatorial

approval.

Currently, the focus is purchasing wetland and grassland easements, in part because increasing land values make it more economical to obtain easements than purchases. "We can protect more habitat with easements than we can with acquisitions," Jones said.

The 1958 legislation allows the FWS to acquire both wetland and grassland easements. Funding for grassland easements comes from conservation partners, such as Ducks Unlimited, North American Wetland Conservation Act funding or Land and Water Conservation Funds.

Duck stamp dollars pay for wetland easements and acquisitions, although WPA management is under the FWS budget. "The duck hunter needs a pat on the back ... every species that exists on the prairies benefits because of their efforts," Jones said.

It's hunters who largely fund what Jones considers the most successful land-based habitat program in North America.

By September 2007, willing landowners in North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, Montana and Iowa sold more than 650,000 acres to become WPAs and more than 2.5 million wetland acre easements during the program's 50-year history.

That's a significant chunk of wetland and wildlife habitat in the Prairie Pothole Region doing more than raising wildlife. Jones is a firm believer that northeastern North Dakota and Red River Valley residents are protected



Waterfowl production areas provide many hunting opportunities throughout North Dakota.



CRAIG BHRLE

Many waterfowl production areas are available to local cattle ranchers for periodic grazing or hay cutting when these activities are prescribed for grassland management.

from even more severe flooding than what already occurs because some landowners accepted wetland easements or sold their land to create a WPA, which holds water upstream and reduces potential flooding.

Waterfowl production areas also provide important recreational opportunities, said longtime Grand Forks hunter, Erik Fritzell.

Fritzell has experienced the joy of hunting North Dakota's marshes for more than 50 years. "When I grew up, you could drive out on any given day and learn the ducks," he said. A hunter could study the marsh, study duck patterns, get access, and hunt the next day. But as private land access diminishes, Fritzell said hunters know they can turn to WPAs and find a place to hunt.

Mike Johnson, North Dakota Game and Fish Department game management section leader, agrees. "It's a significant part of our public land hunting base, not just for waterfowl, but upland and big game as well," he said.

Other types of public land include Game and Fish Department wildlife management areas, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. and North Dakota Forest Service, Bureau of Reclamation, and even some FWS national wildlife refuges. "Those public lands provide a huge amount of public hunting opportunities," Johnson.

Just as waterfowl hunters support WPA acquisitions and easements, North Dakota hunter participation supports the Department's mission, enabling it to provide opportunities for hunters, nonhunters and wildlife alike.

Johnson said the program makes a complete circle. Hunters provide funding, which enables agencies such as the Game and Fish Department and FWS to protect

habitat and provide hunting locations, which brings more hunting opportunities, more hunter dollars to continue funding programs, more land, and more people into the hunting fold.

Plus, people who simply enjoy birding, wildlife watching, hiking, and other outdoor activities, reap the benefit of the hunter's dollar at work.

It's a user-based system that makes an amazing circle.

Johnson is delighted with what the FWS Small Wetlands Easement and Acquisition program does in North Dakota, let alone the entire Prairie Pothole Region. "What's been protected by that program is unbelievable ... it's pretty amazing," he said. "We wouldn't have the wetland base that we have in North Dakota without that program. I'm convinced we'd be looking a lot more like Iowa or Minnesota."

Those two states have lost 99.9 percent of their native prairie and about 90-95 percent of their wetlands.

Perhaps one key to the success of the wetland easement program is the flexibility it provides landowners. A wetland easement only includes the wetland, Johnson said. A wetland enrolled in the easement program can be farmed or hayed when it doesn't contain water. The only restrictions are that the wetlands cannot be filled, drained or burned.

As a waterfowler, one thing Fritzell appreciates about a wetland or a WPA is the downtime hunters often experience between flights of ducks or geese. That quiet time allows a person to truly see and experience all of the marsh's activity – and to realize a marsh is anything but quiet.

It's water teeming with life. To truly appreciate the value of a wetland and the extent of its diversity, Fritzell says a person needs to experience a marsh; a waterfowl hunt.

Not only does it bring a person in touch with the marsh, it helps in understanding the vital role wetlands and marshes play in our quality of life and the crucial environmental benefits wetlands offer.

The FWS Small Wetlands Easement and Acquisition Program, celebrating 50 years, means many more North Dakotans can experience those wide-ranging benefits.

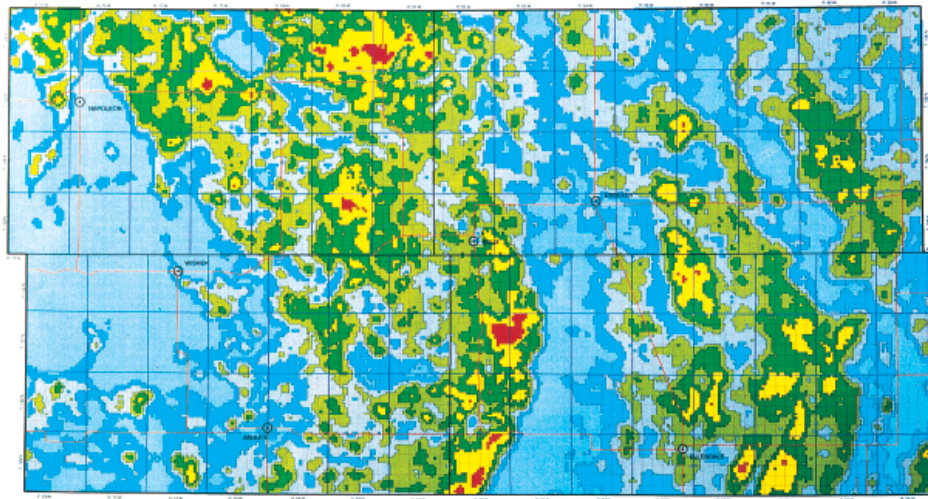
PATRICIA STOCKDILL, Garrison, is a freelance outdoor writer.

McLean County WPA: The establishment of waterfowl production areas in North Dakota and elsewhere in the Prairie Pothole Region resulted from a 1958 Congressional amendment to the Federal Duck Stamp Act.



PATRICIA STOCKDILL

WATERFOWL BREEDING PAIR DISTRIBUTIONS
Kulm Wetland Management District, North Dakota



Much like weather radar maps, where red and yellow sectors indicate heavy rain, “thunderstorm” maps use these same colors to identify the best waterfowl breeding habitat in an area. Knowing where the best habitat is allows managers to spend easement and acquisition dollars in the area where it will do the most good.

Safeguarding Habitat

Even after 50 years, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has more interest among landowners who want to sell small wetlands and grasslands easements, and in some instances sell their land for waterfowl production areas, than available funding.

Doug Mosser, FWS realty specialist, said landowners typically initiate the easement or acquisition process after they somehow hear about the program, although sometimes the agency sends introductory letters detailing the program to landowners in high priority areas of the state’s Prairie Pothole Region.

In the early years, wetland enhancement biologists drove the countryside assessing vital wetlands and grasslands, but today’s biologists are high tech. Even though on-the-ground fieldwork is still used, satellite and digital technology allow the FWS and organizations such as Ducks Unlimited to identify areas with the highest potential for waterfowl nesting and brood-rearing success.

Dubbed “thunderstorm” maps, areas meeting criteria for wetland and grasslands protection literally appear as if they’re intense weather thunderstorms on a map.

After the initial contact, Mosser said biologists analyze several criteria, including proximity to other protected lands, cover type, and other wetlands that can provide pair and brood habitat, incorporating the thunderstorm map data.

Biologists then pass their recommendations onto the FWS realty office. In North Dakota, offices are in Minot and Bismarck. Tracts are ranked and prioritized. If funding is available, the realty specialist contacts the landowner to conduct a second on-site inspection. Landowners are invited to participate, Mosser said. Following inspection, landowners receive a “statement of just compensation,” an easement offer based on a percentage of the land value.

If the landowner signs the contract, the paperwork filters through FWS channels before finalization in its Denver regional headquarters. The entire process can take up to a year, Mosser said.

Wetland easements are funded through Duck Stamp monies while grassland easements are issued through a participating partner, such as Ducks Unlimited.

Currently the FWS focuses on acquiring easements, allowing landowners to retain full ownership of the property. Grassland easements keep the native prairie or grassland root-side down, while wetland easements keep water in the wetland in the years they actually contain water.

Landowners participate in the program for a variety of reasons, Mosser said.

In many cases, landowners simply want to keep grass as grass. “It’s always been ranchland and I want to keep it ranchland,” is a common sentiment, Mosser said. For other landowners, it’s an opportunity to re-establish grass in marginal, unproductive cropped areas. And for others, it’s additional income allowing them to expand or financially benefit their operation.

And yet for other landowners, they simply want to protect and conserve grasslands and wetlands. “There are definitely people out there who want to protect it (grass and wetlands)” Mosser said.

Occasionally, landowners donate or bequest property for WPA acquisitions, said Lloyd Jones, FWS refuge coordinator. Such acquisitions must go through the same process as any WPA acquisition – gubernatorial approval.

Time will tell if the historically high interest in the easement program continues. The FWS identified the need to protect an additional 10.4 million grassland and 1.4 million wetland acres within the Prairie Pothole Region to sustain waterfowl populations, Jones said. In addition to landowner support, Jones said the public, hunters, wildlife and conservation organizations, and state and federal legislators must be program advocates.